



Best Practices for Including and Utilizing Partners and Volunteers

Partners and volunteers are the backbone of successful SAE programs. This group – comprised of parents, school officials, business and community leaders, FFA alumni and the agricultural community – provides the encouragement, financial support, employment opportunities and resources needed to make SAEs possible. The more you include them in your SAE agenda, the stronger your agriculture program will be now and in the future. Following are a few ideas on how to maximize the involvement of partners and volunteers and build ongoing support for SAEs, FFA and agricultural education.

Advisory Council

Every FFA chapter should have an active advisory council that meets at least once a year to review the program and make suggestions. Advisory members should encompass a wide variety of backgrounds and represent as much of the local agriculture industry as possible. A portion of each meeting should be set aside to discuss SAE development, both successes and failures, so that advisory members can offer suggestions for improvement. Be sure to involve the Young Farmer Organization and FFA Alumni in your area. Advisory members are excellent resources for judges, scholarships, SAE funding/loans and program advice.

Agricultural Activity Days

This type of activity involves students, parents and/or other partners working together to increase the subject knowledge of SAEs while benefiting the community. For example, a student interested in production agriculture could participate in a "Harvesting Agricultural Day," where produce is harvested and then taken to an organization such as Farm Share. Students, parents and partners learn about and participate in the harvesting process while providing a valuable service to the community.

Alumni Outreach

FFA alumni are still one of the best resources for SAE support and often welcome the opportunity to help out and continue their involvement. Keep a database of former members and update it on a regular basis. Use e-mail as a tool to keep in touch with regular chapter updates and news about upcoming activities. Put a student in charge of maintaining alumni relations as an SAE or classroom project.

Alumni SAE Committee

Form an SAE committee within the local FFA alumni that includes people with a broad range of agricultural expertise. This group could follow up on SAE progress, provide information, answer questions, make suggestions, offer advice, etc. For example, an alumni member who is a large animal veterinarian can be an SAE resource to all students with livestock-related or equine programs. The alumni member, student and parents could correspond on a regular basis via e-mail, phone and/or in-person visits.

Annual Events

An effective way to involve parents and volunteers in SAEs is to host an annual event that involves the community, parents and school officials. Create an event that is pertinent to your area and relates to the types of SAE programs within your agriculture department. Example: "Step Back in Time" – Students who have livestock or small animals bring them to school on this day and explain the uses and responsibilities of raising livestock. In addition, members and event volunteers promote agriculture products by demonstrating time-honored skills which include making homemade ice cream, soap, kettle corn, grinding corn with a hand grinder, processing sausage, etc. Samples of the food prepared are given to guests. Information highlighting new agriculture technology is also on display, and hand-outs regarding topics such as fertilizers, crops, beef, lamb, pork, etc. are distributed.

Back-to-School Night

During the first part of the year, many schools have an evening in which they invite parents (typically parents of ninth-graders) and their students to experience a "mini" school day. Parents go through the same class schedule as their students and have the opportunity to meet teachers and experience a portion of what their student is learning each day. This is a great time to show off the agriculture curriculum and tout the opportunities available to students through SAEs, FFA and other activities. Put your students in charge of organizing activities and preparing materials for this event.

Booster Club

Organize a booster club comprised of parents and other chapter supporters to help offset the cost of SAEs and other FFA activities. Set up an initial meeting to help the club elect officers and set goals. Encourage ag boosters to develop ideas on how to raise funds and plan activities. This can include everything from providing lunch at shows and fairs, to fundraisers for scholarships and add-on money for student projects. Keep the purpose of the club simple – to conduct activities that support the FFA chapter and its members. Make sure club participants understand their role as a support group, not a control group.

CDE Assistance

Offer partners and volunteers the opportunity to be part of your CDE teams by requesting their assistance with team practices and preparation. Depending on expertise, they may be skilled enough to be 100% in charge of a contest team. Not only does this enhance your agriculture education program and make your job easier, but it shows partners and volunteers the importance of SAE programs. As an example, students with a livestock SAE can set up judging classes for the livestock judging team, and volunteers can place the classes and/or take reasons. Not only does this help the contest team, but it helps the student with the SAE understand how he or she can improve their program.

College/Technical Institute Partners

Most colleges or technical institutes have research facilities and will gladly partner their researchers with FFA students to create agriscience research projects. Students can shadow professors and instructors. In some instances, the professor or instructor may set up field trips for training in an area of expertise. Since colleges and institutes are typically money- and enrollment-based, they are always ready and willing to help out, mentor and meet potential students. They also offer well-educated judges for record book competitions or proficiency eliminations.

Employer Outreach

Conduct a survey of businesses in your area to see what they need in new employees and if they have job openings. Build relationships with business leaders, so they notify you when they're hiring. Provide interested businesses with a list of students needing jobs for their SAEs, including resumes prepared by the students. Assist in matching students and employers according to the student's interest and

employer's needs. As another option, you can arrange student interviews with area employers as part of a classroom lesson. Bring employers in to interview students as a team or on a one-to-one basis. This will expose employers to the value of SAE and may result in a student finding a job.

Local Foundation

Utilize a local USDA/FSA office or bank branch and your local advisory board to establish a local foundation that would provide student SAE loans for starting a business, buying show animals, etc. This is a valuable resource for your chapter and gives students a comfortable/accessible venue for assuming and managing a loan.

Local SAE Competition

Conduct a local SAE project/program competition. Have bankers, industry leaders and community members from the area serve as judges. Students must present an updated record book, summary of their project and participate in a discussion with the judges. Students should be prepared to discuss project successes, failures, what they have learned, etc. This is great exposure to local community leaders and also a worthwhile learning exercise for the student.

Mentor Program

Encourage mentorship by parents, employers and volunteers. If students have a mentor in the same field as their SAE, it will provide much needed guidance and support to save them time, money and unnecessary frustration. If an employer is unable to serve in a direct mentorship role, maybe another experienced employee can provide mentorship and guidance. Use your chapter advisory council, school resources, community contacts and other relationships to develop a mentor list. This will also take some of the weight off your shoulders as students will be able to capitalize on guidance outside of the classroom.

Monthly Parent/Alumni Meetings

Host monthly parent/alumni meetings to review chapter activities, including SAE programs. Have the "Student of the Week or Month" for the month prior (or a "Most Improved" student) present their projects/program during the meeting and receive recognition from the parents and alumni. This will provide encouragement to students and keep parents/alumni involved and motivated about SAEs.

Pancake Breakfast

This is a good idea for any number of partners, including local, county and state political representatives. Host a pancake breakfast at a local park or at the agriculture department during the summer or another time when participation will be high. Chapter members prepare and serve breakfast to partners as a "thank you." Use this time to promote chapter activities using a slide show or video presentation, student speakers, hand-outs or other means of delivering news about chapter activities and the value of agricultural education.

Parent/New Member Packet

One of the major challenges in implementing programs is that parents (and in many cases new FFA members) do not understand FFA, SAEs or agricultural education. Create a new member brochure or kit that explains the basics of FFA, SAEs and agricultural education. This document can include sample records, SAE ideas, a review of proficiencies, etc. Distribute the packets at school open houses or parent-teacher conferences. When parents and students understand what is needed and why it is important, it will be easier to manage their expectations.

Partner Recognition

Use your annual chapter banquet as a venue for recognizing all partners - parents, volunteers, school officials, sponsors, judges, etc. Present them with a plaque, certificate or other tangible recognition to

show your appreciation. It is also a good idea to have members send handwritten “thank you” notes to partners for their contributions and time. Members write notes to sponsors relevant to the activities they participated in during the year. Another option is to place an advertisement in the local newspaper, listing all the partner names and businesses of those that helped you during the year, thanking them for their generous support.

SAE Contact Log

Submit a monthly SAE “Contact Log” to all key administration officials (principal, business managers, vocational directors, superintendent and school board members). This log should include a listing of all visits for the month, mileage, time, purpose of visit, etc. This keeps administrators in the loop with regard to your SAE supervisory activities. In addition, provide a future visit schedule with student names, dates and times of visits, and invite administrators to attend a visit with you as their time allows. This shows continual follow-up and is an invitation for them to take part.

SAE Visits

Schedule regular SAE visits at a time when the student and parent and/or the employer are available. Start this during the student’s freshman year of high school, or earlier in the case of middle school programs. During the visit, recognize all parties for their contributions to the success of the SAE thus far and explain how the parent and/or employer can help the student further develop the SAE. Include all parties in the initial SAE agreement and update it together as changes are needed. Send a note to the parent and employer after each visit, highlighting what is going well. This is an essential activity and excellent way to strengthen partner “buy-in” to SAE.

Scholarships

Parents, grandparents, businesspeople and others may be interested in supporting SAE by creating chapter scholarships for specific SAE programs. In addition to providing funding for the scholarship, these individuals should be involved in award selection and presentation of the award at the chapter banquet. This gives them exposure to students while providing much appreciated and needed financial assistance.

School Administrator Field Trips

Many school administrators have no concept or understanding of SAEs. Invite administrators from the district office, guidance counselors and even elementary administrators to visit SAE programs. For example, schedule a morning field trip to see four or five different SAE projects/programs within the chapter. When the program is complete, have chapter members host a luncheon/barbecue with attendees to further discuss SAEs, answer questions, promote agricultural education and strengthen partnerships.

Sponsorship and Judging Opportunities

Many business people within the community are seeking ways to assist with youth projects. However, most of them are asked solely for financial assistance. Involve sponsors by also requesting their assistance with judging SAE records competitions, CDE contests or proficiencies. This provides first-hand knowledge of the program and will most likely result in their continued participation and sponsorship of future events. Provide judges with adequate, user-friendly rubrics to make the evaluation fair and simple. Reward sponsors/judges by recognizing them at the annual parent-member banquet. Allow them to present the award for their specific area.

Note: *Make sure you approach sponsorship and judges based on their field of expertise. A plant nursery operator is well suited to sponsor and judge the floriculture and horticulture proficiencies, but most likely not a crop or livestock proficiency.*